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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD INVESTIGATES ABUSES IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

REF: A) HCMC 1087 B) HCMC 1093 C) HCMC 2897

1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford traveled to Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces from October 20-22 to meet with local officials and gain a firsthand view of conditions for Protestant worship in Vietnam's Central Highlands. Raising the specter of Country of Particular Concern (CPC) status, Ambassador Hanford laid out demands for an end to serious abuses (such as arrests, beatings and forced renunciations), called for the reopening of closed churches, and urged speedier registration of house churches wishing to affiliate with the government recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). He left lists of religious prisoners with provincial leaders and promised to follow up. As expected, local officials did not admit to any serious violations of religious freedom in their provinces. Still, the visit provided some unique insights into life in this heavily controlled area of Vietnam, as Ambassador Hanford met with local Protestant leaders and sought to investigate allegations of abuse in remote villages on the drive between the two provinces. Ambassador Burghardt and Consul General joined him on the trip. Reftels report on official and unofficial meetings in HCMC and Hanoi. End summary.

THE OFFICIAL VIEW

2. (SBU) Meeting on October 20 with Gia Lai People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Vi Ha and other local officials responsible for overseeing ethnic minority and religious affairs, Ambassador Hanford stressed the need to reopen more than 300 churches that had been closed since the ethnic unrest of early 2001, as well as to speed up registrations for those churches wanting legal recognition. He also called on the Chairman to prevent abuses by local police, such as beatings and forced renunciations. He said he had received information on such abuses from too many sources to believe they were overstated. What's more, his information indicated the majority of those being oppressed were true Christian believers with legitimate, peaceful motives. Only a "tiny percentage" belonged to the Dega separatist movement. Chairman Ha denied police pressure on religious believers, but added that both Dega and former FULRO elements are a real threat and had infiltrated many churches. He promised no one is in prison in Gia Lai for purely religious reasons. Those individuals in prison are there because of their allegiance to Dega or other political agendas, or for common criminal acts incompatible with religion.

3. (SBU) According to Chairman Ha, there are 71,000 Protestants in five different denominations in Gia Lai Province. Nearly all (66,000) belong to the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), the principal denomination of the SECV. Seven churches have been legally registered, but registration requires that a congregation have both approved facilities and a government recognized pastor. (The deputy head of the Committee for Religious Affairs pointed out that there were only 31 Protestant churches in the province before 1975.) There are only four legal pastors and seven lay pastors at the moment, but two students from the province are studying at the new SECV seminary in HCMC. Protestants who do not live near one of the legal churches are still free to worship quietly at home pending registration of their own churches, but Chairman Ha did not see the need to allow worshippers to gather in large numbers at "temporary" house churches. He rejected the notion that the government had closed churches by refusing to recognize house churches as legitimate churches. He acknowledged, however, that 20 Dega churches had been closed. The Chairman asked for more time to deal with the registration of new SECV churches, faulting the SECV for organizational delays in identifying suitable new churches.

4. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford met with Dak Lak provincial People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Van Lang and a similar supporting cast on October 21, and inquired about reports that hundreds of churches had been closed and registrations of new churches were proceeding very slowly. Like Chairman Ha, Chairman Lang noted the importance of training qualified pastors to lead new congregations. He confirmed that there are still only two legal Protestant churches for the entire province, with five more still under consideration. While he admitted that the Dak Lak provincial SECV Representative Board had included 70 congregations on its list for eventual registration, he said they had only submitted applications for five. Meanwhile, he said, most of the province's 120,000 Protestant believers (40,000 "baptized")

continue to worship at home in small family units of up to six or seven. Ambassador Hanford challenged Chairman Lang to explain what appeared to be official documents calling on local officials to eradicate Christianity and obtain renunciations. Ambassador Hanford also criticized the reported closure of 440 churches and provided specific cases of beatings and forced renunciations. He said that every Christian leader with whom he had spoken had assured him that the Dega represented a very small percentage of the overall Christian population. When Chairman Lang blamed the U.S. for supporting the Dega movement, Ambassador Burghardt asked for concrete information that anyone in the U.S. was lending support to activities seeking the overthrow by violence of the current GVN. Ambassador Burghardt also urged Chairman Lang not to block passports for Dak Lak residents seeking to join relatives who had been resettled in the U.S. under various refugee programs.

THE SECV PASTORS' VIEW

15. (SBU) Meetings with members of the provincial SECV representative boards in the two provinces provided a contrasting picture. In Gia Lai, the board members told Ambassador Hanford that they had been given a different time for the meeting. Hence the two Protestants believers whom they had invited from 25 kilometers away, where there had been many recent incidents of government repression, were unable to attend. The SECV board members said there were two applications for registration under consideration, and three more in the preparation stage. Unfortunately, they were only allowed to submit applications for congregations that they already knew would be approved. In addition to 347 churches which had been closed, they cited another 500 "meeting points" which had experienced problems. They estimated that the government had completely shut down approximately 50 percent of the total number of worship places, and regularly visited another 30 percent in order to disrupt services. The remaining 20 percent of the congregations functioned more-or-less normally. The SECV board members thought there were at least 30,000 Protestants of other denominations in the province, in addition to the 66,000 CMA and 5000 "others" cited by provincial Chairman Ha. The board members told Ambassador Hanford that many Christians had been beaten in remote areas recently. Back in August, board members were visited by a man from a village 60 kilometers away who was beaten so badly that he had blood in his urine. A few villagers from neighboring Kon Tum Province had visited just last week to report that 20 or 30 Christians were beaten in Sa Thay District. Some had bruises and needed medication.

16. (SBU) Asked about the presence of Dega Protestants in the province, the Gia Lai SECV board said between 3000-5000 declared Dega admitted their affiliation openly. They estimated there were another 14,000-17,000 "undeclared" Dega followers who sympathized with the movement's goals. When pressed as to whether they were saying that potentially 20,000 of the 90,000 Protestants in Gia Lai Province could be Dega followers/sympathizers, this reliable source said yes. (Note: These Dega numbers are much higher than the Mission had previously thought, as Dega membership has usually been described as "small" or "insignificant." The Dega openly advocate autonomy from the GVN, with some Dega advocating violence to achieve a separate state. Since this particular SECV board member is often considered a reliable source for negative information regarding GVN actions against Protestant believers, we were surprised to hear him acknowledging such large numbers of Dega. End Note.)

17. (SBU) In Dak Lak, the SECV Board said 20 out of 400 churches are presently allowed to operate normally. Claiming they had been cut off from much of their community by restrictions on travel, however, they were unable to personally confirm that 300 house churches had been asked to close since the start of 2001. They had heard that pastors were warned several times to cease their illegal services, then ordered more forcefully to desist, or made to sign documents promising not to conduct services until they were legal. They had only secondhand knowledge of forced renunciations, saying they thought it had happened in some places where Christians were "weak and uneducated." They had only secondhand information on beatings as well. Presented with a list of four individuals, they knew nothing specific about the circumstances, although they knew the individuals and had heard they were beaten. Presented with a list of pastors believed to be imprisoned simply because of their normal religious activities, they said they knew most of them and did not believe them to be Dega, although the government did.

18. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford also visited three remote rural villages in the two provinces to try to meet with individuals alleged to have suffered at the hands of the government for their religious belief. These stops were arranged by pastors in HCMC with extensive contacts in the Central Highlands, and included only individuals who had agreed to meet with the Ambassador. In all three cases, the traveling party was "escorted" by numerous police, both uniformed and plainclothes, who sometimes seemed to materialize out of nowhere and blanket the neighborhood. Residents were understandably unwilling to talk under those circumstances, and it was impossible to locate anyone who even admitted to having heard of any of these individuals.

19. (U) Ambassador Hanford did not have an opportunity to clear this message before his departure.
YAMAUCHI